Aboriginality in southeastern Australia

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The following three articles were originally presented as papers at the ‘Aboriginality in southeastern Australia’ conference held in Canberra in June 1997. This conference was organised by Francesca Merlan and Nicolas Thomas of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Humanities Research Centre, ANU.

The papers have been reproduced in this special section of Aboriginal History, which is spread across volumes 24 and 25. The first four articles of the section, those by Geoffrey Gray, Brian Egloff, Robert Foster and James Weiner, appeared in volume 24. The remaining three papers by Gaynor Macdonald, Marilyn Wood and Ron Hagan now appear in the present volume.

Introduction

The recent flurry of social and historical research in the southeast of Australia occasioned by the Mabo case and the Native Title Act has brought a number of academic disciplines together. From the vantage point of three of these — archaeology, anthropology and history — the contributors to this section of the journal have considered interactions among Aboriginal people (both as agents and as objects of research and of policy), the State, and researchers, during the last hundred years or so. The papers are also indicative of cross-fertilisation and collaboration among these three disciplines. We find archaeologists and anthropologists writing history, historians making sociological interpretations, and writing histories of anthropology.

Interaction among the disciplines

Taken together, the articles in the section point to growing dialogue and collaboration among the disciplines concerned with social research in the southeast. We can attribute this partly to the stimulus provided by the Mabo case and Native Title legislation. Research carried out in connection with Native Title claims, which directly or indirectly informs several articles within this section, requires the integration of a number of perspectives and realms of expertise: a critical anthropology and archaeology of ‘traditional’ social life and culture, social history, social theory dealing with transformation and continuity, the ethnography of cities and small country towns, studies of government policy and action. This research is necessarily embedded in political and legal processes, and often involves a dialogue between researcher and members of the community.
However, the wider intellectual climate favours such dialogue and cross-fertilisation between disciplines engaged in social research. Appropriately, then, the section began with the article in Volume 24 by Geoffrey Gray, which outlined a history of Australian anthropology with reference to the southeast. The article set the context for the direction of research represented in this section.

Writers on social history and social policy, such as Tim Rowse, draw on a wide array of disciplines. Their common subject matter necessarily draws historians and anthropologists interested in relations between Aboriginal people and the state. Anthropologists now often incorporate a historical perspective in studies of colonial and post-colonial relations between former ‘tribal’ and industrial societies, and have long turned their attention to a wide array of social contexts (recently to post-Soviet eastern Europe, for example). The archaeology of colonial Australia, a growing enterprise, necessarily draws on and contributes to historical information and interpretation. Archaeologists, anthropologists and linguists are now cooperating in their enquiries into pre-colonial Australian social forms and processes to an extent not seen since they were linked by the ecological perspective of the 1960s and 1970s and the use of ethnographic analogy in archaeological interpretation.

The collaborations among the three disciplines, together with interactions among Aboriginal people, the State, and social research, gives rise to a number of themes, woven through the various articles making up the section.

Aboriginal agency and the transformation of culture and identity
Several articles address the question of the nature and degree of transformations of Aboriginal cultures since colonisation, a pervasive theme. Some, represented here by Gaynor Macdonald, emphasise continuities of sociality and culture, in kin relations and ties to land. In a similar emphasis on change, James Weiner argued that as the result of missionisation there has been a transformation in the Ngarrindjeri sense of self. When Aboriginal religion becomes self-conscious and objectified, and open to inspection and manipulation, the possibility of fabrication arises. Robert Foster wrote of a generation of deeply religious Aboriginal men who publicly embraced values of the dominant culture in their opposition to Chief Protector South. Marilyn Wood’s view is that an emerging culture at Burra Bee Dee combined Indigenous and introduced elements; moreover Aboriginal people saw themselves as part of colonial society.

This theme involves issues of social and historical interpretation, and has implications for the relationship between research and policy.

Aborigines and researchers in political and legal action
A second theme is the involvement of Aboriginal people and researchers in political action and litigation. In a historical casestudy, Robert Foster described effective Aboriginal activism against legislation in South Australia during the Protectionist era, which sought invasive powers to take children of mixed descent into care. Brian Egloff showed that in the Mason vs. Tritton case the defence placed too much reliance on an expert witness and none on Aboriginal witnesses, and brought out the evidentiary demands of a case relying on a claim to Native Title.

Not only do the products and processes of research affect policy, legislation, and litigation, but Aboriginal people engage with them as well. This is a topic of Rod
Hagen’s article, which examines the use of scholarly resources in the Yorta Yorta Native Title claim, and the need for claimants to engage with those sources.

The effects of scholarly research and writing in litigation are often unintended and unexpected. The accounts of ‘local organisation’ put together by anthropologists such as Howitt, Curr and Smyth, which drew more on the then current dogma that tribal organisation was patrilineal and patrilocal than on evidence, are inconsistent with the earliest reports but have been deployed as authoritative in the Yorta Yorta claim and will no doubt surface again (see Hagen’s article). We might ask what impact some of the contributions to the present volume might have on Native Title claims in the southeast. Models (such as Macdonald’s) which bring continuities of custom and relations to land to the fore, are more obviously consistent with the aspirations of Native Title claimants than those that give more weight to dislocation, loss and the influence of non-Aboriginal action and institutions.

Issues of scholarship
In a third theme, the categories and theories which inform scholarly research and writing come under continual scrutiny. In this section the contributors question categories and dichotomies such as theories of degrees of ‘blood’, contrasts between ‘settled’ and ‘remote’ Australia, ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ Aboriginal society, and, not least, the category ‘Aboriginal’ itself. Again, this issue affects policy, legislation and litigation. As Robert Foster demonstrated, Protectionist policy in South Australia invoked the ‘blood’ theory of race and miscegenation (elaborated in the biological and demographic research of Birdsell and Tindale).